JUST AS I AM
Romans 8:31-39
June 30, 1985

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On September 1, 1974, I stepped into this pulpit the first time as pastor. The first thing I said was, "This is a pregnant occasion." I was right. It was. It has been. And it is still pregnant with possibility for us - and for you. I went on to say, "Preachers spend a lot of time considering what they will say in a first sermon in a new pulpit. From the moment you elected me to be your pastor, I have been conscious of the fact that on September 1 I would be here and you would be here listening, wondering, expecting. It is indeed a pregnant occasion."

That may have been a little overstated. For some reason I kept in my file not only the sermon manuscript but the attendance record that day -288 people were here. That was sobering. And while the statistics have improved a bit, the Sunday before Labor Day is still inclined to be a little thin, and I have grown a bit in wisdom and so will step into the pulpit in Chicago on the Sunday after Labor Day, not before.

It was an overstatement also because we preachers are inclined to exaggerate the significance of what we say. I made the mistake of reading the entire sermon and it wasn't much frankly. So, this week I have tried to resist the temptation to write a summary, or even to think about this sermon as somehow more important than, or even different from the some 450 which have preceded it.

What was pregnant, truly, was the relationship which began on a hot September morning in 1974, the virtual love-affair my family and I have enjoyed with this extraordinary congregation of Christians and this wonderful community. That is now part of us deeply: it is the thee in us, and the us in thee that has created newness and fostered growth; the communion which Jesus celebrated and taught to his followers and which Ernest Hemingway caught in the powerful closing paragraphs of "For Whom the Bell Tolls," as Roberto tells Pilar, "I am with thee now...Go."

What I want to say on my last Sunday is: Thank you. Keep the faith, and All is grace.

Thank you for what we take with us. You have been our family and we thank you for that priceless gift.

Thank you for your open and unashamed love for this wonderful church, and your sophisticated sense that loving this church and following Jesus are often very closely related.

Thank you for the great privilege of being a pastor with you.

And, most of all, thank you for your patience and strength in simply enduring, since April, this extended period of disengagement. Some of you have had to find ways to say goodbye, or at least refer to it, more than a dozen times. Thank you and keep the faith.

Keep doing those things that have made this a great church - in worship and music: in confronting important issues and providing human services.

Pray for your ministers. Every Wednesday morning there is a staff chapel service and among other things that happen, the staff prays for the members, names of the people in the hospital are read, and a group of shut-ins, and then a list of church members; ministers, caseworker, secretaries, business manager, educators, and musicians pray for the members - by name. On occasion someone has said to me, "I am praying for you." Nothing is more powerful, more strengthening, more encouraging, literally more inspiring, than to know that someone is praying for you. So pray for the staff. Pray for Gerry Gregg. He needs it! I know. I have known him since 1962 or 3. When it was not very popular, he and I stood shoulder to shoulder during the Civil Rights Movement - even before we knew each other. We ended up about five miles apart with new church development projects, and - got ourselves in a lot of trouble working for the Lake County, Indiana, Migrant Ministry and suggesting to a news reporter that farmers had some responsibility to provide housing and sanitary facilities and the opportunity for education for migrant owrkers and their families. We ended up on the front page of the Hammond Times, and in a lot of hot water. There is no minister with whom I would rather be in hot water. The best decision this church made in the decade was to bring him here. The next best is to call him as interim pastor, and somehow, Gerry, it is altogether fitting that as the chapter closes, the picketers are outside and the water is still hot. May it always be so.

Pray for the Search Committee. They will work as hard for this church as anyone ever has. Encourage them, cheer them on and tell them you are praying for them. Pray for and love the person whose great privilege it will be to enter this pulpit a year or so from now. What an enviable treat that person has in store. And continue to pray for us, as we will pray for you.

Thank you: Keep the Faith: All is Grace. The sermonic offering is in this cateogry. The title is "Just As I Am." from an old revival hymn.

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidst me come to thee,
O lamb of God, I come, I come!

I am emboldened to use that hymn for a sermon title, I confess, by Harvey Cox, professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School, who wrote an autobiography under that title and for whom the old hymn continues to have great meaning because if its message of grace..."Just as I am...I come." In any event Cox talks about his cihldhood experience in a way that reminded me of mine. It also reminded me of what Frederick Buechner wrote on the first page of a small spiritual memoir, Alphabet of Grace. "At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography...I cannot talk about God or sin or grace...without at the same time talking about the parts of my own experience when those ideas became compelling and real." (p. 3-4)

What Buechner and Cox help me to see is that their elegant theologies are documented in their own life experience, and that the same is true of the people who wrote the Bible. "Whither shall I go from the Spirit?" the Psalmist asked precisely because, in his life he knew and had experienced the answer - there is nowhere God does not go with us. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul asked and then proceeded to recite the times in his own life when he had experienced God's powerful love...tribulation, distress, famine, nakedness, peril, sword.

I was a Presbyterian in the morning and a Baptist in the evening and we sang that hymn mostly on Sunday evening, and even though my almost genetic Calvinism rebels at revivalism of any sort, I always knew that that hymn contained either the biggest lie, or the best news in the world. I have always known that if there is anything to this religion business it is based on something other than my own deserving. For one thing the friend, whose family took me to the Baptist Church where we sang that hymn, and I used to steal apples and cherries, and play the little illegal slot machine under the counter at Hyatt's Confectionary Store - with money we had collected from the paper route, and buy cherry cokes if we won, and lie to our parents about the shortage of collection money if we lost - which I recall being most of the time, and we would lob what we called goonies, actually mud balls, from the hill on the paper route toward an old woman's house and run when we heard the thud of a direct hit on her roof - it being not long after the second World War, and we being Army artillery - her house the enemy bunker, and we ran to the hide-out in the woods to smoke a few Lucky Strikes and talk about Virginia Plowman who subsequently died of polio.

And so I knew, then, that if there was anything to this arrangement, this relationship the Baptists kept insisting be called my salvation, God was going to have to carry it off, because my worthiness would not be up to the task, to say the least. "Just as I am, without one plea." It's either the biggest lie or the best news, and it's the only way any of us are going to make it.

The theological term for it is grace. And I now reflect that life teaches it, if you are able to learn. All is grace, ultimately. We spend the firt three or four decades of our lives believing that we truly are self-made people, that we have pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps and fought our battles alone. And then our grandparents die, and our uncles and aunts and a parent and we discover that it was all a gift; that we are who we are because of who they were, and that there are people we don't even know who contribute to what we are: that influences, motivations, formative judgments, have come pouring into our lives from a whole cloud of witnesses. Cox writes: "No one's faith journey begins at birth. It starts back with the mothers and fathers of our great grandmothers and great grandfathers, and before. "We all meet ourselves," as Soren Kierkegaard once put it, "on a ship already launched, a journey already underway." (p. 14)

Life teaches that all is grace. The more mature one becomes the clearer it is. Time was when we thought we were God's gift to the world. Now we know that it's a miracle of grace that anyone loves us. The time comes when most of us see the truth that good human love is grace; that it has to do not with our own merit, loveableness, certainly our physical attractiveness, a very transitory condition, all flesh being grass as the 90th Psalm reminds us. My favorite refrigerator door epitaph in the home of friends declares..."My figure went the same place your hair went." Good human love has to do, over the long haul, not with the loveability of its object (us), but the subject, with the lover, that amazing woman, man, or child who somehow finds it possible to keep on loving us, putting up with us, tolerating us, hoping with us, standing with us, holding us - to the end.

Time does come when all of that clicks into place theologically and we say, "Yes. That's it. God's love will get the job done. All is grace. Nothing will interfere with it. God will succeed - in spite of my failures." That's the amazing grace Paul is struggling to express in Romans 8. It's why

it's difficult to celebrate the meaning of any human life at its end without that passage: nothing in creation will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Why do we have so much trouble with that? Why do religious people, particularly, stumble over the miracle of grace? God loves everybody? You mean God doesn't love me more because I try to live a good life? You mean God doesn't love Christians more than Shiite Muslims? You mean God's love comes before, transcends, works through and is more important than human religion? You mean we actually have to stop bringing all that old exclusivism, that worn out religious imperialism in through the back door? That everybody who doesn't do it our way, say it our way, live it our way is not only not going to roast in hell, but is incorporated in God's huge and eternal grace?

We have trouble with grace because if you really believed it you'd have to stop shutting people out of God's kingdom...in fact, you'd have to expand your vision, make your theology and your eschatology large enough to include all sorts of people. If you really believed it churches wouldn't have to spend all their energy stealing sheep from one another's folds: counting statistics, and fighting religious wars and excommunicating, heretics, and burning witches and looking down their noses at one another. If you believed in God's grace in Jesus Christ religion could devote itself to running into the streets to tell the Good News: dancing in the streets to celebrate it: enhancing life in the streets out of the sheer goodness of it all.

If grace were real what would the religious bigots of the world have to do?

Karl Barth said it wisely:. "We dislike hearing that we are saved by grace. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live by his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." (Deliverance to the Captives, p. 40)

In the Gospel narrative people are forever complaining about Jesus' lack of discretion in his choice of associates. He insisted on befriending the very people religion had consigned to hell. One time, when the criticism was particularly strong, he told a sequence of three stories - all about a God of infinite grace: the shepherd who goes after one lost sheep; the old woman who turns her house upside down to find one lost coin; and the magnificent story about a father whose love for his two sons is so extravagant it can be called prodigal.

Christianity is the Good News of a God who loves each of his creatures like that. The church's purpose is, simply, to tell that extrordinary news: to express it in every possible way, and to live it out in the life of the world.

If the purpose of the enterprise - the religious quest - is not to make the whole world into Presbyterians or Baptists, what is it? "The chief end of man," the crusty old Westminster Divines began their catechism, "is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever." It is not to squeeze us all into one mold. It is not to squeeze us full of right thinking so that, when someone pushes our button, we can recite the right creeds, sing the right hymns, or repeat the right pious formulas. The purpose is to get us to lighten up a little: to free us from mortal terror about our own death, and to deliver us from the egotistical exclusivism which tries to consign all the rest to hell - and to

allow us to love this beautiful world we have been given, and the gift of our own lives, and the incredible miracle of the people we have been given: to love it all and to leave it all a little better than we found it: to love it all and the God who gave it all - and to enjoy it - because it is his gift.

The purpose of it all is to live fully and well the life we are given, knowing that nothing in this life or beyond will ever separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

The old hymns say it well: better in fact that all the theology you can read - or all the sermons you have heard.

Just as I am, without one plea
O Lamb of God, I come.

Better yet: "Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home." Amen.